Other Heres and Elsewheres

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Other Heres and Elsewheres

by andyoureturntome

Summary

Will runs away with the monster, but he won't love him. Not yet.

Season 3 Canon Divergence.

Notes

This is un-beta'd at the moment, so please forgive any mistakes!

The narrative is slightly fractured in the sense that the timeline doesn't follow a linear structure. For the first part of this story, the chapters alternate between present and past until their plots converge.

Canon-divergent following the commitment of Hannibal to the BSHCI. In this universe, Will doesn't marry Molly, and he doesn't retire from teaching. Additionally, I'm not acknowledging the Red Dragon story line.

[Warning: This fic depicts an extremely unhealthy, very destructive relationship. In fact, it romanticizes emotional manipulation and violence. This is very context-specific to the show, and I in no way condone this in real life. Please be aware that, since this *is* Hannibal and Will we're talking about, there is cannibalism, murder as foreplay, moral bastardization, and mutual (though consensual and encouraged) violence. As such, this love story is, at times, very much a horror story.]

Any triggers that exist in the show also exist in this fic. You can message me through tumblr or email (links available in my profile) if you have any specific questions about the content.

Obligatory Notice: I do not own the show, the characters, or the source material for the show. I don't write for profit, but I do write at the expense of sleep and real-life obligations.

Chinese translation by daisy_q available **here**.

See the end of the work for more notes

How to subtract hell: faintly.

Chapter Summary

PART ONE.

"I am the love killer,
I am murdering the music we thought so special,
that blazed between us, over and over."

—Anne Sexton, "Killing The Love"

It happens while he's cutting the oranges.

Hannibal would *have picked blood oranges,* he thinks balefully. He studies the bloody tips of his fingers, watches the way the rivers of his palms run red. *This is as close to the real thing as we'll be allowed to get for a while.* He wonders why this makes him feel deprived.

The knife is shaking in his hand. Every time his eyes fall closed, he sees his nightmares come to life. And, suddenly, he's no longer sure whether he's paring human or fruit flesh. And he doesn't know which he'd rather it be. Doesn't know why there are still things that dance behind his eyelids every time he blinks. Things that scream and bleed and shred in his hands.

Metal clatters to the floor as the knife jumps from his hand, almost of its own will.

His head hurts, a searing pain flying through his temples. He imagines the folds of a human heart, coming apart like slices of an orange. Some sick part of him wonders if other body parts come apart just as easily.

Without entirely meaning to, he smashes the orange into pulp beneath his hands. Red rivulets run down the counter. His skin feels suddenly unlivable, pressing too tightly against him. His person suit doesn't quite seem to fit him anymore. His muscles twitch with animalistic nerves wanting to rip through to the surface.

His entire body is seized with tremors, leaving him paralyzed in their seismic hold. Light erupts behind his eyes. He can't breathe, can't breathe, can't breathe, can't breathe. Shadows loom everywhere, concave in their height, growing into a thicket around him. They're fingers clawing toward him, wending their way around his ribs, trying to rend him apart.

Blood on his hands. He's got blood on his hands. It's soaking through to his marrow. He wants to peel off skin and muscle and bone. Wants to see all of that blood pouring out. Other people's and his own. All the blood he's spilled and can barely keep in.

Somehow, he's on the floor, his body shaking apart. He wants to shred his skin to pieces. Wants to break every bone in his body. He could do it. He knows how. His hands have done it so many times before, both inside of his body and inside of Hannibal's.

The self-hatred rips through him and explodes out of him. Half-formed feelings of anger and resentment take control of him and guide his actions, ripping the choice away from him.

Blackness starts to creep in around his vision. His clothes are heavy, *so heavy.* He pulls at the suddenly thick fabric, drenched in his sweat. The collar is crawling up his neck, suffocating him. Buttons strain against his chest. With every exhale, his clothes seem to grow tighter, like a boa constrictor wrapping around him, trying to compress him into nothing.

There are body parts everywhere: arms grow out of vases, their fingers drooping indifferently, like dying petals; legs hang above the counter like drying meats; heads line the shelves, watching him through empty eye sockets.

He claws at his head, as though he could crack it open and make it all go away.

Breathing comes in stuttered pants, and he can't bottle the panic.

With shaking hands, he begins to drag himself backward, out of the kitchen and down the hall. His body leaves a bloody streak on the floor. A corpse being pulled away from the scene of the crime.

The bathroom is so white. It's too white. He's going to leave bloody fingerprints everywhere. Not a single surface will be free of the violence of his body.

He rips at his clothes, tears himself free, throws them aside, and takes desperate, gasping, tearing breaths. Shaking terribly, he curls in on himself, knees to elbows, as he knots his hands in his hair. Each breath he drags in seems to break him further apart.

Will doesn't know how many minutes tick by as he lies there, but it's long enough for Hannibal to come home and find him there, stripped bare before him, an arc of loathing and fear. The curve of his body is a continuous circuit, an ouroboros. He commits his own murder daily, consuming himself so that the monster can arise anew.

Calmly, Hannibal steps around him and turns the handles of the shower. Neither says a word as the steam begins to snake lazily between them, making everything go blurry.

His muscles somehow simultaneously stiff and limp, Will drags his body into an upright position, trying to tempt it into movement. He's split down the middle: half of him is unresponsive; the other half is a live wire.

Leaning heavily against the counter, he makes himself stand. Hannibal stares at him for a long pull of seconds, and to anyone else, it would look benign. But Will knows better. He sees the flinch of hunger in those lips.

Performing their daily danse macabre, they step around each other, their only point of contact their eyes. He closes himself in the shower, obscuring Hannibal behind the mottled glass

door. The thrum of the water, a scalding beat against his back, is not going to be enough. Hands braced against the cold tiles, he begs for purgation.

Slowly, his body deflates against the wall as though trying to flatten and paper against the cracks. He wishes he could lose himself in the swirling drain of water, wishes he could just fall away.

And then his anchor pulls him back into reality. He hears the shower door open, feels the cold blast of air as Hannibal steps through, some of the steam escaping, taking the comforting heat with it.

Will doesn't move.

Hands bracket around him, existing just outside of the ones he has pressed against the tiles. Teeth bite into the back of his neck. Hannibal breathes out, low and tempting, against his skin. The full line of his naked body presses against Will's.

One by one, Hannibal laces his fingers with Will's, managing to infuse something sinister into the slide of skin. Lips skate over his shoulder blades, punctuated by teeth.

"In what color do you dream, Will?"

He can only gasp a response.

"Tell me."

More teeth.

"Do you dream in *red?*"

The arousal is a sharp spike down his spine, and he subconsciously arches toward Hannibal, a keen low in his throat.

Hannibal breathes out a term of affection that gets lost in the hiss of the shower.

"All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."

Will wonders if Hannibal too can see the water running red around their ankles.

Hannibal laughs and wedges a knee between his legs, spreading them apart. Gentle fingers trace down his back. Tease at the curve of his ass. A tremor runs the full length of his body.

"It still haunts you doesn't it, Will? I see you fighting it. Even now, you're still fighting me."

Will's knees disprove him, crumpling in their want. Hannibal catches him easily, bracing a hand against his chest. The other wraps around his waist. His erection is long and heavy against Will's thigh. He grinds back, looking for friction.

"Why do you continue to fight me, Will?" the monster whispers to him. "Why won't you let yourself have me?"

Slicked fingers breach him, too much, too fast. But Will wants it. Oh, god, he wants it. He bucks backward, trying to get Hannibal to *move,* but he holds willfully still, sanctimonious as he considers his next words.

Without warning, Hannibal lunges forward, his fingers still buried deep within him. His teeth are at his ear.

“I loved you to the point of self-annihilation.”

He crooks his fingers, almost thoughtlessly, almost lazily. Will sees stars and gasps, the sound on the wrong side of painful.

“I was willing to murder my entire world—I was willing to murder *you*.” There’s a long pause, the silence weighty. “At some point, destroying you became tantamount to destroying myself.”

Will can feel the desire hard and pulsing against his back. He can still feel his own traitorous arousal hot against his thigh.

“I do not ask destruction of you, Will. I am asking you to become something greater. I am asking you to do so without fear."

Hannibal’s hand closes over his throat, and he feels the primal urge surge through him. The urge to fight—the urge to rip out his throat. He then feels the scream to be dominated, to be molded to Hannibal’s will, to become the monster that he knows has been lurking in his bones, waiting to burst forth.

This is why we can’t talk about these things between us, Will thinks. *This is why I can’t let you in. I hate you, I hate you, I hate you, I hate you. I need you inside of me. I need you to break me open. Seep into the cracks of who I am and fill me up. Change who I am. Rip me apart.*

Hannibal pulls his fingers out, leaving Will reeling in the loss. But he barely has time to process it before he’s being filled again.

Hannibal pounds into him. With each thrust, his hips slam against the wall. He knows it’s going to leave bruises. Hannibal claws at his skin, raking up red ridges all over his chest.

Good, Will finds himself thinking. *This is how he loves. His love is a scar.*

“Do not be afraid of your becoming, Will.”

He stutters a grip to find something, anything. To find Hannibal and hold him against him.

“Do not be afraid of your becoming,” he repeats. “Especially when you’re becoming *Mine.*”

Breath punches through him, an iron fist straight through his ribs. With a mangled cry, Will comes, his knees shaking as he struggles to hold himself up.

Though Hannibal has a solid hold on him, he still feels himself slipping away.

Hannibal is still thick and heavy and hard inside of him. He holds very still. Will can't even hear him breathing over the spray of the water.

I am yours, he thinks. *Of course I am. You made me that way.*

All he sees is red.

You don’t consent to an abduction! You consent to an elopement.

“I wanted to see if you’d look different.”

“Different from what? The monster that lives in your head?”

Hannibal locks his hands behind the small of his back, buoys his weight over the balls of feet. Will scans the calculatedly indifferent planes of his face, tries to read the meanings in the micro-expressions that dance, almost too quickly to catch, in the twitches at his mouth, in the upward tic of his brow. He wants to go back to living inside of that head, to go back to breathing through those emotions, instead of just looking at them from the outside.

You know, don’t you? You know what I see when I close my eyes. It’s you. It’s always you.

“What were you expecting to find, Will?”

His voice is soft, taunting. The ever-potent magnetism of it bleeds through. He’s powerful as he rounds the edge of his table, sumptuously predatory in the way he draws closer to the glass. His face is benign, immutable.

“Were you expecting to step into the gaping mouth of your nightmares? To find the blackness closing in around you? Tell me. Do I stand at the jagged maw of your Hell?”

Will wants to shatter the glass that stands between them and lodge all of the broken shards through him. Wants to claw out those eyes, sunken with smugness. He imagines closing his hands around that throat, imagines crushing the life out of it. For a moment, he can feel the sensation of the strangulation, can feel every individual finger wrap around his own throat and bruise his skin. His breathing chokes off at the point where the thumbs would meet, just under his chin, crushing his windpipe, trying to break him apart.

It’s past sorting out: what is real and what isn’t; what belongs to him and what belongs to Hannibal.

He’s gasping, the ricochet of dysesthesia almost knocking him sideways. He takes unsteady steps closer, hearing his breathing roughen as he watches Hannibal mirror his progress.

He presses his head against the glass. Laughs unsteadily.

“You *are* my Hell.”

Hannibal brings his hands to the glass, slides them down so that they are framing Will’s head.

“Interesting,” he muses.

Will closes his eyes so that there is only his voice.

“Hell: the metaphysical crucible of punishment for our immortal souls. Where we must burn for our taboo desires and our carnal sins.”

Blood pounds in his ears; his heart feels caught at the base of his throat.

He opens his eyes, meets that divining stare levelly. He lays his hands flat against the glass, matches up his grip with Hannibal's. His palms curl pleadingly, his fingers bend in begging. Now, he wants to break through the glass for a completely different reason, so he can reach through it and pull Hannibal against him. Wants to feel their heartbeats line up into a single thrum. Needs to feel the proof that they are not separate entities; that they never were. Wants to hold onto him until the reassurance soaks through his bones.

"Am I the home of all of your lust and fears, Will? Do you burn within me?"

He breathes out heavily. Light condensation fans out in front of him. Hannibal's face warps weirdly beneath the warm glaze. He spaces out his fingers so that they fit in between Hannibal's.

"Run away with me."

We make each other alive; it doesn't make a difference if it hurts.

He's infuriatingly poised and unruffled when Will rounds the corner into the sun-dappled kitchen; cloyingly innocent in the pale, dust-filtered light. Everything about him is immaculate, even the creases from where he's sitting in his pale gray suit. They're sharp, precise edges at his thighs and waist that mirror the hard, uncompromising lines of his profile.

Will is himself dressed in a ratty old t-shirt and boxers, garbed with every intention of returning to bed following a quick, choked-down breakfast. He stares at Hannibal across the room from him. Smug and self-satisfied, Hannibal watches him back over the top of the newspaper held aloft only half in theatricality.

With a smart rap, he folds it and sets it down next to the remains of his breakfast. Calmly, his lips pursed in careful surveillance, he folds his hands over his lap, crosses his legs, angles his body away from the table.

"Would you like to talk about it?"

"No."

He absolutely doesn't want to talk about this morning. Doesn't want to talk about the way that Hannibal, while still hard, had left him there, boneless and ashamed in the shower until the water had run cold. He doesn't want to talk about how much he aches to put Hannibal on his knees, to make him lose control with a single touch. He doesn't want to talk about the way that *his* knees practically buckle with the desire for it, now.

Swallowing hard, he edges his way toward Hannibal, toeing the line between predatory and reverent.

"It might help to talk about it. You might sleep better if you do. I know how these things keep you up at night. You haven't been sleeping very well at all, lately."

Well, children do *sleep better when they're certain the monster in their closet is gone, not when they invite it into bed with them.*

Hannibal points to the newspaper, lying innocuously on the table. On anyone else, the gesture would seem a careless flick of the wrist, but Hannibal does it with a deliberate delicacy that punctuates the action with a sense of purpose. Will stares at the thin, folded pages with growing uncertainty. They only read the paper for one thing these days.

"They are increasing security measures at the borders and exit points. Jack doesn't intend to lose us to Europe again."

A shaky sigh ghosts over Will's lips.

"What number does the FBI have you at?"

“One.”

Will wants to claw the smile off of his face. There’s far too much conceit in it.

That’s not actually something to be proud of, he wants to shout at him. *The whole point of this is to* not *get caught, you lunatic!*

Hannibal blinks calmly at him, so much opulent peace radiating off of him that it’s actually maddening. What happened earlier is forgotten. All of his doubt is forgotten. Fear eclipses all other sensibilities. All he can see is Hannibal: the only point of clarity in a suddenly blurred world.

He sputters out an insincere laugh.

“And you’re worried about my *lack of sleep?*”

“Will. Come here?”

It’s the way he asks the question that knocks him off guard. Or, maybe, it’s the fact that there’s a question at all. For the first time, Hannibal looks vulnerable, uncertain.

And what else is there for Will to do other than to stumble-fall toward the open arms that, in another life, in a different light, would look like death’s embrace?

He insinuates himself between Hannibal and the kitchen table and feels his arms slide into place around him, settling into a deadlock at the small of his back. Air catches in his throat, that reliable spasm of fear running the length of his spine, just like it does every time Hannibal touches him. Because he doesn’t quite know how it’s possible for a body to react like this: for it to unlearn every tactile sense just so it can relearn how they manifest with the addition of Hannibal’s fingers, of Hannibal’s tongue, of Hannibal’s body.

It’s to the point where his body doesn’t even know how to exist without the knowledge of where Hannibal’s fits in every bend and crevice. Invisible lines snake between them, between every point where they’ve touched and then separated. And what a broken constellation they form. What a fascinating collection of burning points of light, of searing touches.

Will reaches out, running his hands through his hair. Hannibal closes his eyes and tips his head back, following the upward drag of Will’s fingers. Even watching him breathe is fascinating. Will brings tentative thumbs to the sharp planes of his cheekbones.

Apparently sensing what he wants, Hannibal lets out a heavy breath through his mouth, letting the hot air hit the palms of his hands. The thin skin of his throat quivers, exposed nakedly to the air.

Hannibal watches him through slitted eyes.

“You worry far too much, my dear Will, and you have no reason to. They are not looking for us anywhere near Rhode Island.”

Will hardly hears him. He's too busy watching him breathe. It's such a human thing to do, and it shouldn't be surprising to him, but it somehow is. Because everything about Hannibal always seems so preternaturally still and controlled, as though he exists on a higher plane. A realm occupied by demi-gods. It's almost laughable to think that he is beholden to such basic mortal needs as breath.

"Will?"

He hums a response and dips his head lower, crowds closer into Hannibal's space.

"I doubt it will take long for someone to make the connection that one of your ex-patients has a vacation home in Narraganset."

"We destroyed all of my patients' files, Will. And I did not have to kill anyone to gain entrance to our temporary residence—one of your rules, if you'll recall. We are flying, as per your wishes, as far below the radar as is imaginably possible."

Powerful hands curve around his face—hands that are meant to destroy, but they're holding onto Will, instead, which is more or less the same thing.

"However, I am flattered by your worry."

And then Hannibal kisses him, deep and filthy, and Will feels the fight go instantly out of him. He barely has time to be angry at his traitorous body, so willingly pliant and needy beneath Hannibal, before he loses himself completely in it. He lets himself be lifted onto the table, lets his legs trap Hannibal against him. Lets himself break to the need, just a little, just for a minute.

His hands skitter over the table, looking for an anchor, and close over something sharp, instead. And he knows exactly what it is. He couldn't know it any better than if he were born with it in his hand.

He closes a fist around the handle.

New fervor in his bones, Will kisses back with reckless-laced abandon, wanting to coax a similar reaction in Hannibal. He wants to see him wild and undone. Wants to see him rip that mask of control to shreds. But Hannibal remains unmovable. Ever calm, he kisses Will back with just the right amount of pressure, just the right amount of heat, but there's something he's holding back. Something he's not letting Will have.

In a moment of smallest surrender, he drops his head back, exposing the naked column of his throat to Will, baring the most defenseless part of him.

Faster than he would have thought himself capable of, Will brings the knife to the thudding pulse-point. He lets the blade rest there, its sharpness a gleaming threat.

Hannibal's hands fall away, and he opens his eyes to look at him mournfully. But he's not surprised. Why should he be? He saw this coming all along. From the very first moment they met.

He doesn't try to pull away.

"It will hurt you to do it, Will. That would be the hardest part of letting you do it. And I *would* let you, of course."

He looks so inescapably sad that it wounds and winds Will. It slackens his grip ever-so-slightly on the knife.

It's akin to a physical blow, to see Hannibal look so lost, to see him look so close to defeated. His eyes, alight with pain, watch Will sadly. Something in them fractures and breaks in the mid-morning light.

He reaches up again and closes a hand lightly around Will's cheek. Unthinkingly, Will leans into the gentle hold. The knife quivers uncertainly in his hand. He closes his eyes, just for a moment, and allows himself to exist only within that touch.

Somewhere far away, Hannibal's voice floats toward him, breaking easily through his consciousness. Will sees it in languid shades of blue.

"It seems an obvious thing to say, but I must tell you, just the same: you are holding the knife that can kill me."

Will blinks himself out of his stupor and looks at Hannibal who is watching him with peace in his eyes.

"But I'm not worried, Will. I gave you that knife a very long time ago."

Only this one dream: You come too.

“Nothing for three years and then twice in one week.”

Hannibal laughs lightly to himself, lying back on the couch, his eyes closed serenely and his hands clasped at his stomach. Reclining unconcernedly, head lolling languidly, he allows the smallest smile to flit across his lips as he taps his feet together.

“Just the same, it is always good to see you, Will.”

His voice is peaceful, calm, measured.

“You look sleepless.”

“And you look smug,” Will shoots back testily in a loud, clear voice.

Coyness seeping into the shape of his lips, Hannibal tips his head to the side and cracks open an eye to study him. Whatever he sees in Will’s face seems to increase his amusement because he gives an almost lewd little chuckle before tilting his face back toward the ceiling. His eyes flutter shut, and he pops his lips peevishly.

“Like the cat who caught the canary.”

“What?”

“It’s how Doctor Bloom described my appearance following our last interaction.”

“I imagine that’s a fitting description.” He laughs without humor. “Cats *do* enjoy playing with their food.”

Hannibal doesn’t answer.

Will eases himself toward the glass, his hands already reaching. He wonders if Hannibal can feel the longing.

Hannibal tips his head to the side again, pushes up to his elbows. Contained energy pulses around him, and Will is struck, for the first time, by how much he resembles a caged animal in there. *We were foolish,* he thinks. *We were so foolish to think we could trap him. To think we could keep him. To think that any of this is something other than his design.*

“Was there something you were hoping to gain from this, Will?”

He shrugs somewhat helplessly.

“Perspective?”

Hannibal is fully upright, now, looking at him evenly.

“That is an intimate thing. It has been a long time since you’ve looked to me for that. Do you trust me to inform something so precious?”

“No. That’s just it. I’ve come to see it undone. It’s occurred to me recently that, perhaps, my worldview has become somewhat skewed. Of course, I can never reclaim my past feelings for you, can never rescind my actions, but I can contextualize them. I can see now that I had the wrong *perspective*. Because I was living inside of *your* head.

“I let you warp me, change me, so that I was twisted around into something that resembled you.”

His hostility-laden accusation echoes around the still room, but it draws no reaction.

Heaving a much put-upon sigh, Hannibal draws to his feet, mustering an impressive amount of self-importance for someone wearing a shapeless, gray jumpsuit.

“William,” he whispers quietly, casting his name in a darkly sarcastic hue, “did you become a monster?” His hand drops heavily to his chest, and he drums his fingers over his rib cage. “Did you find yourself wondering if the mirror was telling you a lie?”

Will’s hands slide down the glass, his hold rendered slack by the strange sense of foreboding that has taken him over.

“Tell me, Will. Did you begin to dread your dreams? When you closed your eyes, what did you see? Do you know what I saw? I saw you devour yourself so that you could be reborn. And it was breathtaking.

“But there was always so much fear in you. There was always so much dread. I forever wanted to tell you: *‘Do not be afraid. There is beauty in becoming. Do not be afraid.’* ”

Will shakes his head, his forehead pressed against his hand.

Hannibal approaches him, a slow-growing, self-satisfied smirk snaking its way across his face.

“You try to tell yourself that this isn’t you; that you merely got lost inside of me. But we both know that this isn’t true. All this time, you were only finding your true form: one whose edges were hewn perfectly to match mine.” His hands meet Will’s across the glass. “You will come back to me, Will.”

And it almost knocks him sideways—the overwhelming want that seizes his insides.

Hannibal nods at him, daring him to argue.

“You will come back.” He waits a beat. “Ask me again.”

“Run away with me.”

Interlude — Flashback.

Chapter Notes

> This scene is lifted straight from canon, with all of the dialogue coming directly out of season 2, episode 12.

“Hannibal...influenced me to kill my patient, our patient.”

She is infuriatingly inscrutable, this shrink of Hannibal’s. It’s not hard to see why he likes her. Will thinks he rather hates her.

Will shoots up a disbelieving eyebrow.

“You weren’t coerced?”

Somehow, she feels entitled enough to look annoyed at the question. She gives him a fleeting, appraising glance, her eyes narrowing only slightly.

“What he does is not coercion, it is subtle persuasion.”

Hannibal certainly got his money’s worth with her. Will thinks she might be smarter than them all.

She smiles at him with true enjoyment, like she’s relishing the question before she asks it.

“Has he *persuaded* you to kill anyone?”

“I was attacked by a patient formerly in Dr. Lecter’s care. I killed him in self-defense.”

Laughter glitters in her eyes, but she holds every line in her face willfully still.

“You’re distorting the truth to keep who you think you are consistent.”

“My truth isn’t distorted, Dr. DuMaurier. I know what’s true.”

The interrogation room is quiet enough for them both to hear the lie screaming through. Apparently allowing it to persist, she speaks again.

“Has Hannibal tried to persuade you to kill anyone that wasn’t in self-defense? He will.”

She looks indecently happy about that.

“Then it will be someone you love.”

Her voice drops to a near whisper.

“And you’ll think it’s the only choice you have.”

I have time. Please, devour me.

Will takes the knife back to bed with him because he doesn't know what else to do with it. It feels at home in his palm, tucked under the pillow while he tries to sleep. He tells himself that it's there in self-defense, and then he wonders just when it was that he started to wear blades as shields.

His body aches with exhaustion, but he can't find sleep; he is too preoccupied with the stretch of space that exists between where he is and where Hannibal is. Thoughtlessly, his hand trails down his side, reassuring himself that there aren't hooks in him, that Hannibal hasn't somehow managed to sink chains through his ribs to make him stay.

Somewhere in the bowels of the house,—most likely in the library—Hannibal lurks, restless and bored. He doesn't do well, being caged. But twice now, he's let himself be, for Will. It's a dangerous precedent for Hannibal to set: to be locked away so willingly, to allow himself to be so thoroughly trapped.

Will twists restlessly in the stifling sheets and struggles to fall into a fitful doze. Like flames, feverish dreams lick at his mind, tempting tendrils of half-conscious imaginings finally tugging him under.

He dreams that he's in the belly of the beast—trapped in the cage of its ribs. The knife is in his hand again, and he presses it experimentally against the fleshy walls of its stomach. It would be easy, so easy, to gut it, to claw his way out from the inside. To kill the beast to save himself, but, suddenly, rote survival doesn't feel like enough anymore. He craves something…*more*…something *greater*. Sublimation.

Drenched in sweat, he is pulled into consciousness by a light touch to the face. Gasping painfully, he snaps upright, pulling the knife on instinct.

Hannibal draws back slightly, hands held up in surrendered supplication. Will swims through the peaceful calm brimming in his eyes. Slowly, so as not to spook him, Hannibal leans forward again, not even flinching when the blade presses into his stomach with enough pressure to make the threat but not enough to breach fabric or skin.

Slowly, Will unfolds the tension from his body and eases himself back into the mattress. A new wave of tiredness hits him, and the fight bleeds out of him. He doesn't want blood right now. He doesn't want violence. He wants Hannibal, warm and safe, beside him. He wants

sleep-warm bedding and easy touches. He wants the sensual promise of naked mornings and nights: stripped of all of their human skin and allowed to exist as they are.

Tenderly, worship in his lips, Hannibal brushes a kiss along his brow. Fingertips tease lightly through Will's curls. He lowers himself onto the bed, and Will allows himself to roll into the dip his weight creates.

With a gentleness Will forgot he could possess, Hannibal cages his body around him, laying kisses across his collarbones and over his cheekbones. Will can hear his slightly-rasped breathing, and it's a more intimate thing than any touch that could ever be landed against him.

He wants to pull that breathing through his own windpipe, but Hannibal is still holding something back from him, his body hovering purposely above Will. The only contact they have is Hannibal's knees by his hips and his hands against his shoulders.

Ignoring the fact that he's going to hate himself for it later, Will lets the last bit of resistance seep out of his spine, and he pulls Hannibal flush against his body, relishing the weight and the sudden feeling of being complete. He really is shortchanging himself, he decides, by cutting himself in half every day, by making his body exist split straight down the middle.

For the first time, he feels the wall around Hannibal crumble. He gives a contented huff and curls his body around Will's, burrowing in.

Sleep is a warm, full revelation when it comes, and Will drifts easily into it, not able to separate into dreams or reality the kisses being pressed all over his body, each one leaving his skin humming with the cadence of a blessing.

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He wakes tender and full and wanting.

Hannibal is gone from the room, and with a bereft breath, Will pushes himself up from the bed. His legs go limp beneath his sudden weight. Dark shadows dance over the walls. He'd slept all day.

Blearily, he scratches his stomach, a migraine blooming behind his forehead. Something about waking has left him wrong-footed, a feeling amplified by the absence in the room.

Digging through their bags,—hastily packed by him weeks ago—Will pulls out a dark green cashmere sweater. It's excessively luxe and was likely exorbitantly priced, but it smells like Hannibal, and it instantly calms the sharp-edged need inside of him. He puts it on along with a ratty old pair of his own jeans. He's still chasing the wholeness. He wants the two halves of who he is to make sense.

Leaving the bedroom behind, he navigates the maze of rooms of the house, trailing through hallways lined with pictures of strangers. He wonders if this feeling will ever go away: this feeling of not belonging, this constant ache for a home.

He finally finds Hannibal in one of the many sitting rooms, close to the front of the house. An antique crystal scotch glass rests on the mantle, Hannibal's long fingers curled around it. The amber liquid sparkles and winks in the soft golden lamplight of the room, draped in shadows and dark romance. Hannibal is himself leaning against the brick, staring unseeingly into the unlit fireplace.

Affection swells in Will's chest, and he can't help the yearning, can't help the possessive pulse that passes through him. He steps through the doorway and walks toward Hannibal, his body moving through the room like an offering plate.

Stubborn to the last, Hannibal doesn't turn to face him, even when Will is directly behind him. The stiffness is back in his spine, the same withholding in his posture.

Undaunted, Will leans forward, wraps his arms around his waist, hooks his chin over his shoulder. On a strange impulse, still cocooned by the inexplicable warmth Hannibal had gifted him earlier, he presses a soft kiss to the nape of his neck where pale blond curls under, grown just a shade too long.

An almost undetectable jolt runs through Hannibal, his breath cutting off ever-so-slightly. He recovers quickly, cloaking his surprise with a doleful, languorous look over his shoulder. The way he looks at Will is gutting. So much profusive sadness, so much unspoken regret. It's there in the steady strum of his eyes, almost liquid.

No longer able to hold his gaze, Will drops his eyes and nuzzles his head against his shoulder.

"Have you already eaten?"

Hannibal turns completely toward him. His face is a wall again.

"Not yet."

Thoughtfully, he twists one of Will's curls in his fingers. There's a small, suspicious shift in his lips.

"Your face is doing that secret smile thing."

A small upturn at Hannibal's mouth is the only betrayal of his true amusement.

"I've been thinking. We should have our neighbors for dinner."

Alarm radiates through him, and Will stumbles back.

"You know we can't," he hisses.

"They have been so gracious to us, lending us their newspaper—though, to be fair, I don't think they've missed it."

There's a distinctive thump from the front of the house, like the sound of a door falling closed.

“What have you done.” And it’s flatly not a question.

Hannibal smiles again, a dangerous thing, a white flash of teeth. He leans forward and presses a kiss to Will’s forehead.

“It’s been so long since I’ve properly cooked for you, Will.”

There are more muffled thumps, the sounds growing closer.

“Hannibal—”

“—They have a *lovely* daughter. Not so sure about her boyfriend, though. Son of the help. Her family doesn’t much care for him, either.”

Hannibal’s lips twist in self-aware irony.

“But you know all too well the lure of forbidden love. And you know teenagers. Whatever it takes to make it work. Whatever it takes to make it last. They’re very good at keeping secrets. At finding hiding places. They take every open door they can find.”

From down the hall, there’s a crash, a hushed whisper, a stifled giggle.

Will’s heart thuds hard in his chest.

“What have you done?”

Despite himself, he lets himself be drawn into Hannibal’s orbit. Basks in the pressing heat. He leans up into the kiss. He feels Hannibal’s lips curl into a lurid smile.

“I opened the door,” he whispers into his mouth.

Interlude — Memory.

Chapter Notes

> This scene is lifted straight from canon, with all of the dialogue coming directly out of season 2, episode 8.

“If you’re going to do this, Will, you have to do it for yourself.”

...

His finger tightens on the trigger. It itches for the kill. Everything around him seems to slow down. Hannibal is there in blurred relief; he almost seems a trick of the shifting light.

There is so much blood. Red is everywhere. It would be so easy to spill some more.

He doesn’t flinch.

The trigger clicks. The hammer falls.

The bullet stays in the gun.

Relief and fury battle each other as his eyes zero in on the thin collection of tendons and bones blocking the firing pin.

One day, *he thinks,* I will eat that finger.

Will watches Hannibal as Hannibal curves his hand around and pulls the gun away. He barely feels the slide of skin. Their faces a breath away, Will feels the fluttering of hot air mingling between their mouths. Hannibal leans closer, nipping at Will’s ear. He breathes with the cadence of wonder.

“With all my knowledge and intrusion, I could never entirely predict you. I can feed the caterpillar, whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature and is beyond me.”

It’s the process of seeing yourself in things that are not you.

“…And as you can see here, it’s almost loving: the attention to detail, the care with which the body is displayed. It’s a murder, yes, but at the same time, it becomes art…a thing of great and terrible beauty. The killer didn’t—”

Will stops suddenly, taken aback. Blinking rapidly, he frowns in puzzlement. A hand quivers eagerly in the air in front of him, an anomaly in his usually grimly silent lectures. He clears his throat awkwardly, giving himself a moment to recover from the surprise, and focuses on the face that the raised hand is attached to.

“Y-yes?”

She smiles at him, almost in apology.

“You speak of this murder like it’s elevation, like it was something done in reverence. You said it was ‘almost loving.’ But can psychopaths actually even feel love?”

“‘Psychopath’ is a bit of a clumsy word. It’s a bit too broad-strokes to encompass the mind of a killer—”

“—But still,” she persists, “to be able to slaughter another person, to just take life without regret, suggests that the killer sees other people as something lesser than he is. I don’t understand how you can describe feelings like that as reverent.

“Take Hannibal Lecter, for instance,” she continues wryly, and Will definitely flinches at the mention of *that* name. “You’re quoted as saying that he saw his victims as nothing more than pigs, but he still staged the bodies elaborately, just like *this* killer did.”

Will looks at the projected image behind him, as though it holds some kind of answer for him. He turns back to the girl who is still looking at him expectantly.

He presses his knuckles into his forehead, running them back and forth. Finally, he responds to her, fighting to keep his voice calm.

“And your point is?”

“Just that, Lecter cannot feel love any more than this killer can, and, yet, they both are still able to produce *art,* as you call it.”

“Is there a question in there?”

“I guess I’m just wondering why, if they see themselves as so far above their victims, they would want to make them into art?”

Will’s mouth flutters into a pained smile, more of a nervous tick than an honest expression of enjoyment. A sputter of hot breath escapes in his frustration.

“God, as far as anyone believes in Him, is a supreme being, correct?”

There’s a vague ripple through the lecture hall as his students nod, some of them uncertainly.

“So we are, necessarily, beneath Him. We are lowly creatures made of mud and dust. But He loves us, because we exist in His image, and because we do not know how to be any better. It is only when we are dead that we transcend our bodies and supposedly ascend to the Eternal Kingdom.”

Nervously, he paces around his desk, his fingers jumping agitatedly over its surface.

“When Hannibal Lecter kills, he believes that he does the same thing. He brings these people to a higher plane of existence. It is *almost* an act of love. But he only loves it as far as he sees it as an extension of himself—his masterpiece, painted in blood.

“He speaks in the language of benevolence: *‘Look what I’ve done for you; look at the gift I’ve given you. I have made you so much more than you could have ever hoped to be.’* ”

The girl frowns at him.

“So what drives the pathology?”

“Why do painters paint? Why do poets write? Why do creators create?”

He paces restlessly, his shaking hands shoved deep in his pockets.

“Hannibal Lector doesn’t see his peers as your run-of-the-mill thugs, your gas station robbers, your homicidal spouses. For him, killing is an act of intimacy. It’s *art.* Don’t you see? His peers are Dante, Botticelli, Wagner, Puccini, Michelangelo, Da Vinci, and God Himself.”

There’s a hush in the lecture hall. No one speaks; they’re all afraid to break the spell. He knows they all wonder about him and Hannibal. Knows they’ve read all the papers about them. Reporters fanaticizing their ‘love affair.’ Scholars trying to psychologically profile their relationship. FBI agents discrediting any claims of misconduct.

He clears his throat.

The girl winces a smile at him.

“Is that where the love comes in?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Some of the most inspired art comes from a place of passion.”

She pauses.

“And the argument *has* been made that Hannibal Lector is in love with you.”

You can never run away. Not ever. The only way out is in.

There's still time to run.

He's fairly certain he could get away with it. He's been reported as Hannibal's hostage. It's an easy angle to work. He could call Jack and tell him where they are. Could retreat back into the refuge of the FBI. The whole nightmare could be over.

But the idea of losing Hannibal makes his breath cut off. The suffocating panic claws up his windpipe, and his hands spasm in the air, looking for something to grab hold of.

"Sir?"

Will jumps in shock. He blinks the girl in front of him into focus. Uncertainly, she's holding the spices out to him.

"Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." He runs a hand over the thick stubble at his jaw. "Allergies."

Suddenly paranoid, he tugs his hat lower. He fumbles the money out of his pocket and hands it to her. His eyes, obscured beneath dark sunglasses, dart suspiciously. Rationally, he knows that he's not the one they're looking for. From what he's gleaned on passing TV screens and filched newspapers, he knows that Hannibal's is the picture that the news focuses on. Will is always just a footnote, if he's mentioned at all.

It would be so easy to run. There's still time.

He turns away from the stall. A flash of dark hair darts past him. Attached to it is a pretty heart-shaped face with sad, dead eyes. *Abigail.* She looks at him in askance, caught in freeze-frame. She smiles at him, and it's such an achingly beautiful, euphoric thing.

A gash opens in her neck, an echoing, crimson smile.

Numbly, he watches her bleed out.

A sea of red gushes toward him, swallowing him up.

A shoulder collides with his, jolting him back into reality. He flounders for a moment, lost in the crush of people. Families and couples, happy and full of love, wander through the farmer's market, enjoying the late September sunshine. They've never known the touch of violence. They've never known the intimacy of a blade.

He glances down at the list Hannibal had written for him in his perfect, lilting script. For a moment, all he sees is a catalog of body parts:

- *Male, 29—Heart.*
- *Female, 25—Liver.*

- *Female, 12—Lungs.*
- *Male, 5—Marrow.*

A family, a perfect match, walks past. The little boy runs ahead of his parents, scaring away a couple of birds drinking from a puddle. He laughs with such a tinkling innocence that it makes Will's bones ache. His pudgy arms, soft and fleshy, stretch out like wings as he circles around and runs back toward his mom.

Laughingly, she scoops him up, pressing kisses all over his chubby cheeks. The image of the family swirls together into a kaleidoscope of colors: the pink of their flesh, the red of the girl's jacket, the coppery sheen of hair.

He shakes his head and forces himself to walk away.

The list has turned back into non-human food. He tells himself it's a relief.

A police officer walks past him, giving him a slight nod.

"I have two dead bodies in my basement!" he wants to shout at him. "I'm living with the most wanted man in America, and I'm possibly horribly, destructively, hellishly in love with him."

There's still time to run. He could pull the rip cord right now. But Hannibal would never let him go. He would hunt him down. After all, Will belongs to him. He shivers, and he can't separate the desire from the disgust.

His knees go liquid, making the decision for him.

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He thought he needed distance in order to see Hannibal more clearly, but nothing makes sense until they're together in the room again.

Hannibal's standing at the sink, his sleeves rolled up to his elbows. Will wants him so badly that it supersedes everything else, even breath.

Without realizing his choice had been made, Will lets his feet take him to Hannibal. He needs to be closer, ever-closer, to him so that he can put him into perspective.

Hannibal presses a hand to Will's cheek, his fingertips curling around the back of his head, tracing the shape of his skull.

You know what I look like without my skin, don't you? he thinks. *Of course you do. You'd know me in every shape and every form in every lifetime. There's not a dimension that exists where I'm not yours.*

He kisses Hannibal with a desperate kind of fervor. His ribs ache with how terrible the need is in his lips. Their bodies feel like such spiteful, cumbersome things—the only things left holding them apart.

And, still, Will's hands reach—will always reach—in their want for him.

Hannibal cradles Will's face between careful palms.

"Do you still want to run, Will?" he whispers against fevered skin. "It doesn't matter if you do."

He bites down on his lip, hard enough to draw blood. Shamefully, Will whimpers. All sense of self-preservation is gone. He lets Hannibal walk him backward over the floor.

"You can run all you want." Will's back is against the wall. "You will always come back to me."

Will sees the blow coming. He sees the snap of decision in Hannibal's eyes, and he wants it so terribly, it nearly makes him retch.

It's a gift when his head jolts back, colliding hard with the wall behind him. It's a blessing to finally feel the black embrace of unconsciousness.

Sometimes I don't think of you for hours, and it's Heaven.

He dismisses his class early only partly because Jack's standing in the doorway.

Without ceremony, he powers down the slideshow and begins packing up his notes. He doesn't miss the way his students linger, prolonging the gathering of their things, stopping and pretending to exchange notes and double-check facts. It's not a coincidence that they're all watching Jack in askance as he makes his way to Will's desk.

He grins at Will with his all-consuming smugness and leans up against the corner of the desk. Will shuts his briefcase with a dismissive snap.

"Hello, Jack."

"I heard through the grapevine that comments in your lectures are now closed."

Will bristles.

"Questions and comments that are pertinent to the lecture are always welcome. However, anything about *Hannibal Lector* is grounds for dismissal."

Jack's friendly demeanor doesn't slip, but there's a look in his eyes, something edged in sharpness.

"That's a very specific ban. Want to tell me where that came from?"

"Do *you* want to tell me why my students are suddenly obsessed with Hannibal? Why they interrogate me about him at every possible opportunity? They ask some very *pointed* questions."

"Really? Like what?"

Jack's voice is still light and humored, but it's belied by the dark sheen to his eyes.

"Like, *'Are the Freddie Lounds articles about you and Hannibal Lector true?'* And, *'Have you been to see Hannibal Lector since he turned himself in?'* And, *'What is the nature of your relationship with Hannibal Lector?'* And, this one's my favorite, *'Do you think Hannibal Lector is* in love *with you?'* "

Jack lifts an invasively inquisitive eyebrow and sinks a hip onto the edge of the desk.

"*Do* you think that Hannibal Lector is in love with you?"

Will drops his head between his shoulders and braces himself against the desk. He huffs a laugh.

"You know, it's actually surreal that I have to keep having this conversation."

None of his students are even trying to maintain the charade any longer. They almost look like museum pieces, frozen in a tableau of fevered, hushed, prying curiosity.

Jack waits him out.

“Do you know how often love is compared to hunger? How often the two are used interchangeably? In poetry: *Could he daily feel a stab of hunger for her? Find nourishment in the very sight of her?*”

Will almost laughs. Jack is still watching him, his eyes cutting a line right through the middle of him.

“So, to answer your question—yes, Jack, Hannibal Lector is *starving*.”

He drags his briefcase toward him, careful to knock Jack with it.

“And as for your other question, the one about the nature of our ‘relationship,’ I would say that that’s a dinner party that I don’t plan on attending.”

“That wasn’t *my* question. I believe you said that that was one of your students’ questions.”

He gives a pointed look to said students, interrupting their lingering, and they scatter. Will watches them go, his anger climbing.

“Yeah. Questions expertly planted by you.”

Jack laughs, like they’re both in on the joke.

“I guess you should double-check who’s covering your lectures when you’re out sick with one of your migraines.”

“You’re not a lecturer, Jack.”

“I made an exception.”

“Why?”

He clasps his hands over his stomach and looks levelly at Will for the first time in their entire conversation, dropping all pretenses.

“The academy is here so that we can try to unlock our unsolvable cases, see if we can find answers through a new perspective.”

“And I’m one of your unsolvable cases?”

“No. *You and Hannibal Lector* are my unsolvable case.”

Will scoffs, disgust curdling low in his stomach. He turns on his heel and begins to stalk away.

“You know the kinds of people he attracts, Will,” he calls to his retreating back. “It’s not unreasonable for me to be worried.” Will turns slowly back to him. Jack stares stubbornly back. “You wouldn’t believe the letters he gets. Seriously disturbed people. All obsessed with him. We’ve got eyes on some of the more dangerous ones. But I guess I have to ask you, do I need eyes on you?”

“Don’t you already?” Will jerks his head over his shoulder, indicating Alanna standing in the shadow of the doorway, her arms crossed and her face apologetic.

She shrugs helplessly at him.

“We’re just worried about you, Will. The obsession that the two of you have with each other isn’t healthy.”

Will looks between the two of them, festering frustration gnawing at him.

He points at Jack and drags the finger toward Alanna.

“I know what this is. This is guilt. The two of you think it’s your fault that Hannibal and I fell in together. You think that if it hadn’t been for you, none of this would have happened to me, that I wouldn’t have gotten dragged under like I did.

“You’re wrong, of course. Hannibal and I would have found each other no matter what. We’re a matched set. The universe would have wanted us together. It’s a collector like that.”

He gives Alanna a look heavy with implications before turning back to Jack.

“You wanted Hannibal to get into my head. You wanted his touch on me. Congratulations, Jack. You got what you wanted. You opened Pandora’s box. So you don’t get to bring me your guilt now that you’ve found that it isn’t lined with hope.”

You in others—this is your soul.

Without looking up at him, Hannibal turns the page of his book, somehow managing to make the muffled noise sound haughty. He draws his lips into a pompous pucker, his profile a warm, orange glow in the dim lamplight. Will can see that his eyes are no longer moving, but he keeps his head down, feigning, just the same.

Will shucks off his shirt and steps out of his pants, no ceremony to it. It feels natural to be bare with him. To feel raw and lacking and vulnerable.

Taking care to jostle the bed as much as possible,—it comforts him to put wrinkles in Hannibal's life—he crawls over the sheets. There's a calm, rippling peace within him that speaks to the completeness he finds in the complicity of their whispered violences, their midnight bloodsheds.

Nesting his head against Hannibal's side, he curves his fingers tentatively over Hannibal's naked stomach.

Above him, Hannibal turns another page. Will feels the swell of the words before they're spoken.

"Did you enjoy your dinner?"

Will turns his head and smiles against the curve of his hip, speaking his next words against skin.

"I had to eat it alone."

"I suppose I was still angry at you. How *is* your head?"

He winces at the reminder.

"It has its own heartbeat."

Gentle fingers card through his hair and over the bump, purposefully kneading it to tease out the pain. Will gives him the pleasure of hearing his sharp, injured hiss.

"I am sorry for that, Will. I do so hate to lose my temper."

He sounds more thoughtful than sad and not nearly as apologetic as Will thinks he should. Hannibal shifts, angling his body toward Will. He sets his book to the side. A few seconds later, the light snaps off, and then they're just two shapes breathing in the dark. Shades of blue color the room.

"There is something about you that triggers in me a staggering lack of control. I let so much slack in the line that you always seem in danger of getting away. Your contrasting tautness is endlessly frustrating."

Will slides his hand up to Hannibal's throat, closing it in a chokehold, no real threat behind it.

"Yes," Hannibal practically purrs, and Will can feel the vibrations run the length of his arm. "That's exactly what I'm talking about."

His thoughtful tone sounds a lot sadder now, and it sends an answering ache through Will's bones. Hannibal jerks his grip away from his throat by the wrist, but then, at the end, he softens the action. He drops Will's hand to a cradle in his lap.

Hannibal's long, artful fingers trace the lines of his palms, more by feel than by sight.

"Do you know why we have these lines on our hands? It's so we can stretch and fold our hands without tearing our skin. We can make fists, reach out a pleading hand, and it doesn't rip us. It doesn't break us open."

He brings his lips now to trace the dips of his palms.

"I like to think that there is something similar in our souls."

Hannibal tips his weight over. The sinewy, predatory pull of his motions drags him under, and Will relents to him without hesitation.

Hannibal kisses with gutting desperation. Will can't breathe under the relentless crush of it. It's almost selfish, like Hannibal doesn't want him to draw a single breath that hasn't passed through his mouth first. His body is heavy against Will's, a searing brand of heat.

He kisses like he's asking for something, but he won't let Will see him, anymore. Those secret parts of him are tucked away, out of sight. And Will wonders how he's supposed to live like this: crushed beneath this crooked love.

He lets Hannibal step into his body like he's trying on a second skin. They move in tandem, molding against each other without resistance. And suddenly, it's all slicked skin and tangled limbs and frictionless flesh and a heady, spiraling ecstasy of need.

Hannibal slides into him without reverence. In fact, the second he's inside of him, he feels farther away than Will's ever felt him.

Hannibal rips his lips away, yanks his body up and off of Will so that they're only connected at the one point. He wraps his hands around Will's hips, jerks them up, pounds their bodies together.

"I know you've been wondering, Will," he grunts, dipping his head, so that his teeth are just behind the thin skin of his ear. "How I'd do it."

Will gasps.

"I'll tell you."

Hannibal twists his hips, and the pleasure's so sharp, it almost hurts.

“I would split open your veins. Every last one. I would find every single line in that soul of yours. I’d bleed you dry.”

But you still wouldn’t get what you want.

He pounds into Will one last time, and Will almost loses consciousness with the white rush exploding behind his eyes.

Hannibal pulls out too fast—always too fast—and rolls away, still hard.

Chest heaving, Will lies next to him, soaked through with sweat from head to toe.

Everything’s red again.

I exist in two places, here and where you are.

“You’re letting him win, you know.”

Alana draws abreast of him, her hands clasped at her stomach. Together, they stare through the plate glass window, watching Matthew run across the grounds, his wobbly toddler legs struggling to keep up with his hurry for exploration. The wide-eyed wonder of him carves out a pit in Will’s stomach.

He runs toward Margot and is willingly swept into her arms. As Will watches him laugh at the smacking kisses pressed to his chubby cheeks, he is keenly reminded of what he was almost allowed to have, of what he can never have again.

Margot points to the window, and she and Matthew wave at Alana, and the picture is complete. They’re a family.

Alana turns to him, concern creasing between her eyes.

“Three years of silence. I thought you’d finally gotten clear of him.”

Will squeezes his eyes shut. He can feel the beast breathing low in his rib cage.

“I’ll never be clear of him, Alana. He’s inside of me. There’s not a breath he takes that I can’t feel.”

“That’s what he wants, Will. He’s exploiting your empathy.”

“It’s not that simple. I’m living a half-life without him.”

He steps closer the widow and presses his head against the glass. Its cool touch does nothing to soothe the headache raging in his skull. When he opens his eyes, he can almost see Hannibal’s ghost standing on the other side, a phantom smile misting across his face.

“I hate that he’s in *that place*.”

“He thinks that he did it for you. Really, he did it *to* you. He knew that as long as he was trapped, so were you.”

There are tears beading in Alana’s eyes as she reaches for his hands.

“Don’t let him win, Will. Forget about him. Leave him behind. You can find someone else. You can have a family. You can be *happy*.”

Will laughs, a true laugh for the first time in a long time.

“You don’t understand, Alana. My entire universe reorganized itself when I met him. An explosion of light from a single point of darkness.”

He drops her hand and reaches to cup her cheek, instead. His thumb catches the stray tears escaping the cage of her eyelashes. She lets out a quivering breath against his palm.

“He’s coming for me, now. No matter what.”

His smile is little more than a grim line.

“Can I ask you one favor?” she begs through a breath.

He nods.

“Tell him that you want Matthew. He wants to give you a family, Will.”

Her chest heaves with a suppressed sob.

“*Please.* It’s the only way my son survives.”

“I won’t let him kill you, Alana.”

“It’s not going to be your choice.”

Again, he nods.

He sees the destruction tunnel out before him, and he knows exactly what this is going to cost. But there is no other way. This is how this always goes: Hannibal takes away all of his options, and then he makes him choose.

Will can feel the monster clawing at his collarbones.

“You’re going to have to run, Alana. We’re all going to have to run.”

My love knows few words: I like it in your blood.

“I’m assuming you have a plan?”

Hannibal looks up at him from where he’s kneeling in the garden. Tiny tufts of green sprout around him, and it looks like human hair.

He rubs dirty hands over his thighs and squints up at him through the sunlight.

“Perhaps.”

Will tries and fails to suppress the frustration bubbling beneath his skin.

“You’re angry with me.”

He garbles out an indignant laugh, his sardonic tone strangled by the ire.

Hannibal preens below him, rolling his neck, blinking slowly, luxuriously.

“I am.”

“You’re angry with me, so you’re withholding.”

Hannibal rises to his feet, never once dropping his eyes from Will’s.

“Yes.”

“Why.”

The curl of dirt-crusted skin around his cheek is soft. Hannibal doesn’t even bring out his claws. Their shadows tangle together under the late afternoon sun, and, almost like a magic trick, they become a new animal, the warped shape of them cast in rippling black shades over the dirt. And this is what the two of them have always been; what their love has always been: the alchemy of shadows.

“Hannibal, why?”

As soon as he asks, he realizes that he doesn’t want the answer. He’s too afraid that it will break the fragile peace that they’re currently trapped beneath.

But the longer they hang in the silence, the more Will realizes that he wants Hannibal to say *something*. To be, for once, the one who is left vulnerable. Just this one time, Will wants it to be Hannibal’s guts that are splattered across the dirt so that they can pick them apart; so that they can dig out the weakness, dissect the need.

He pulls Will back into the enclosed porch by the hand, all of that extravagant sadness enveloping them and clogging their lungs.

Will lets himself be stretched across the daybed. Lets Hannibal straddle his knees.

He leans down and cuts his teeth into Will's neck.

"I've already told you why, Will."

Will drops his head back, offering up the long column of flesh for claiming. The guttural sound that Hannibal lets loose is not one of a mortal man. It's something primal, cut from the core of the earth, when humans were still made from dust and clay.

He reaches beggar's arms around Hannibal, cradling their bodies together, willing them to disappear. He wants Hannibal to peel back their skin so that they can spill into each other, so that they never have to be separate. *Whisper me home. Lull me into the seep of your blood. Hum me into the set of your bones. Sing me back into the curve of your ribs.*

Abruptly, Hannibal stops kissing him, goes utterly still in his arms, almost as though he can hear Will's carnal desires, screaming through flesh. He draws back slowly, not quite able to look Will in the eyes.

He traces a finger down his cheek. Will closes his eyes against the touch, feeling the impending confession swelling to his lips.

"I thought about turning us in," he gasps. "I thought about bringing all of this to an end...Bringing *us* to an end. Then, I realized that it wouldn't change anything."

Hannibal doesn't react but to trail kisses down Will's face, bringing his nose to rest in the dip of his collarbone.

"I thought about killing you."

Part of Will distantly thrills at that. Feels the spark of arousal run the length of his body.

"You would have been my last. I would have fed on you until I starved."

Will convulses beneath him, the desire a living thing bred between their starving bodies. He drags his fingers down Hannibal's cheeks, tearing the soft flesh there. Turning it into something rough and ruptured.

"I wish I could have seen the storm that birthed you," he stutters out through broken breath.

Hannibal's eyes are black as he lifts his head to kiss Will breathless.

"I've got him here, between my knees."

Clothes come off quickly, are thrown carelessly across the floor. Will becomes swallowed whole by the desire. Becomes an appetite.

He pushes Hannibal backward and lines up their naked bodies.

For the smallest second, he sees the flash of fear in Hannibal's eyes. And, suddenly, he understands. It's the rejection Hannibal can't stand. The denial.

I've made you a part of me now, Will, his eyes seem to say. *You're as deep down as my own blood. My own marrow. You can't say 'no' to me now. You don't get to tell me 'no.'*

He pushes himself down, takes Hannibal dry.

It hurts, this dry friction, but he needs it to. He grits his teeth and rocks them together.

"Touch me," he bites out. "You never touch me. Not like this."

Hannibal's hand closes around him, strokes him in long, chafing pulls. All he knows is burning skin.

He chases the pain. He wants Hannibal's touch. Wants it bloody.

Will comes first because he's easy that way, would always be easy for Hannibal that way.

A shout, half mangled by agony, is punched out of him. He wants to scream so loud that every time after, when Hannibal hears his voice, he thinks, *pain.*

He feels Hannibal's hands cut into his hips. Feels him start to pull away. He locks his knees around Hannibal's ribs.

"No," he growls. "No. Inside me. You don't get to hide. Not from me. Not anymore."

Hannibal bucks up to meet him, his mouth dropped open in a silent scream.

"I've already seen everything you try to keep from me."

He bites into Hannibal's neck, leaving a deep, jagged ring, pooling red with blood.

"I know where you keep your secrets."

The monster in him wants to eat him alive.

"I live there."

He forces his neck right against Hannibal's mouth, and Hannibal lunges forward, tearing out a chuck of flesh.

Will relishes the dripping blood, revels in the matching scars they've left on each other.

"There," he groans. "There. Now we both hurt the same way."

Hannibal comes with little more than a gasp of Will's name, every other thing on his face freezing and dying in the pleasure of finally losing control.

There, he thinks as he melds their bodies together, while Hannibal's still softening inside of him. *There,* he whispers to himself as Hannibal burrows his head into his collarbone, a

curious dampness collecting there. *There,* he says to Hannibal's stilled form, his limbs tangled with Will's to create a fleshy forest of longing and fear. *There. Now it's going to hurt you just as much as it's going to hurt me. Now we'll both get to feel the tissues tear if one of us ever decides to leave.*

Interlude — Detail.

Chapter Notes

> The first quotation is lifted directly from Season 3, Episode 6, which is borrowed from Thomas Harris's text.

"If I saw you every day forever, Will, I would remember this time."

Will closes his eyes so he can frame the memory and keep it.

A perfect, crystallized moment that could stretch into perpetuity:
Hannibal, a man who found his soul in the body of another. Hannibal, a beast who would let himself be tamed.

He sighs like the breath is a heavy thing that he's grown weary of carrying around.

"The difference, Will, between us, is that for me, it is not a choice."

Will's heart stops and starts in his chest, his breathing cutting a jagged summit up his throat.

"Shall we?"

Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same.

“And, what was his answer?”

“He didn’t give an answer. He never does.”

Bedelia’s eyebrow raises an inquisitive inch. An imitation of surprise.

“You’ve asked him before?”

And Will hates how not a single question she asks is actually a question. He nods begrudgingly, anyway.

“Yes. And every time, he laughs at me.”

Bedelia stretches out the silence, inviting him to fill in the blanks.

He draws to his feet, his hand resting on the back of the chair he’s just vacated.

“Was this…where he sat…when he—?”

“Yes.”

The ghost of Hannibal Lector is sitting in the room with them, taking up the space that Will has just taken up while simultaneously taking up the space that Will is currently taking up.

Will can’t look her in the eyes, partly because he’s afraid of what he’s going to find there, but mostly because he doesn’t want to know what pieces of himself he’s going to see staring back. He wanders over to the wall of windows, rolling up his sleeves with angry hands.

“What did he talk to you about?”

He’s jealous, so jealous of her.

She was the one who got to strip back the veneer. *She* was the one who got to overturn all of the pebbles in Hannibal’s soul.

To her credit, Bedelia doesn’t say a word about patient confidentiality or compromised morals.

Will can feel her unfailing stare at his back.

“He talked about you, mostly. He struggled greatly with his feelings for you.”

“And what about now?”

“*Hannibal* is not the one struggling, now.”

Without asking her permission, Will pours himself a drink and then instantly wants to hurl it through the immaculate glass table. He wants everything in shards. In perfect, fractured crystals. All he can see is the shattering, it plays over and over in his mind. He dreams of broken teacups and microscopic cuts in palms.

"What does he want me to do? Come to him on bended knee? Does he want me to *beg?*"

Bedelia doesn't answer him. He starts to feel smothered under the quiet and the questions.

"Is he punishing me?"

"Why would he punish you?"

There it is. That knowing tone. The way she tucks the answer in the middle of her question.

"Because I rejected him. I told him *no* when he wanted to leave with me and Abigail, and I told him *no* when we came back home." *And a million times in between.* "Now, he's rejecting me. I ask him to run away with me, and he laughs."

He whirls around to face her. His empty glass slams onto the table with a loud crack. He doesn't remember draining it.

"Why'd you go with him?"

Her intelligent eyes rake over him. There's a flash of something steely in her gaze.

"You hate me for doing what you wouldn't allow yourself to do. The thing you cannot forgive most in yourself is that for which you blame me."

His pulse quivering at his throat, Will stares at her, goading her on.

"Do you want to hear that I was a poor replacement for you? That I was daily a disappointment to him? That I watched his heart break further every day that you did not come to him?"

"Did it?"

He means to laugh it off, but the words come out sounding strangely sincere.

"Yes. He gave you his broken heart, didn't he?"

Will closes his eyes, pictures the body that called to him in Florence. He pictures every meticulous murder, every delicate detail that Hannibal had ever laid at his feet.

He breathes out, and it's a shaky, incredulous thing.

"He has gifted me his heart in every state it's ever been."

Bedelia looks strangely victorious.

"Some would say that this is fitting description of love."

Will sputters out a laugh.

“This isn’t *love*. This is two broken people trying to fix their cracks by fusing themselves together.”

A smile crosses her face, the first expression she allows to break through the stoicism.

“In him, you have found your fated other half.”

“There is no such thing as fate. Just an excuse we give for the choices we make.”

Delicately, she folds together her hands and leans slightly forward.

“So ask him again.”

You’re like death, you take everything.

Will wakes in their bed, which isn’t where he fell asleep.

Long shadows fall over the room in uneven bars. Through the open door, he can see Hannibal leaning over the balcony, one long, naked leg crossed over the other. Sunset hues bleed through the sky, haloing his silhouette in orange and red. Every hair on his body is illuminated, each one a tiny, glowing ray. He looks like a sun in his own right: a stunning source of light.

Rolling from the bed, Will gathers the sheets around him, insulating himself from the oncoming night. As he approaches, Hannibal’s body seems to release, to liquefy, like all of the blood within him is trying to escape the prison of his skin. He looks over his shoulder at Will, his face similarly thawed.

He reaches out for Will, unfolding a gentle grip from the clasp of his hands. Will tucks himself into his hold, draping the sheet around the two of them, sharing the warmth in an act of faith against the autumn chill.

Hannibal smiles at him, gentle and fragile. His knuckles drag down the curve of his cheek, and Will winces in want. He knows how quickly that touch can turn brutal.

He leans into their cocooned heat, finding Hannibal’s body pliant against his. He buries his face against the thrumming promise of life at Hannibal’s throat. Feels the steady thud of a pulse. He presses his ear harder against the flesh until he has the sound narrowed down and amplified. Like the rush of the ocean hitting the shore.

He twists his face until he’s looking out over the railing. Hannibal drags his fingers down the back of his neck.

“From almost every window in this house, you can see the water.” He presses his lips to Will’s head. “I do believe that is one of its primary selling points.” Hannibal lingers in the silence, weights it with his thinking. “Interesting thing, water. It has a primordial draw for humans. It’s the cradle of life—the beginning of all of our beginnings.”

Will watches the unbroken line of the horizon, sees the smudge of their neighbor’s house, a mile off in the distance.

“You and I are bad beginners, Will.”

Will lifts his chin and catches Hannibal’s lip between his teeth.

“So let’s start again.”

Take me back to our beginning. Let me want you with all of my wants; let me fear you with all of my fears. Allow me this love that is dying and resurrected.

Hannibal pulls away suddenly, sending cold air in a gust against his front.

“Lovely as this place is, I cannot help but resent it.”

There’s a bitter, desperately sad twist to his features. He steps further back, putting yet more distance between them. The empty space bruises Will.

Hannibal steps back into their bedroom, and, naturally, Will follows. He gestures to Will, to the room at large.

“Here is where you feared me. Here is where you regretted me.”

The monstrously hungry curl is back in Hannibal’s upper lip.

“I would sooner burn this place over our heads than let it stand one minute longer.”

Will can smell the smoke. Hannibal is watching him steadily.

With a sigh, he damns Hannibal and his operatic inclinations. One of these days, they’re going to get them killed.

He grabs their bags, shoves one at Hannibal.

“I guess it’s time for us to go?”

“Yes, Will. We’re going to walk through fire. See what comes out the other end.”

Compulsion is always narcissism: I miss you, admit it.

Seeing Bedelia at his front door is surreal. She looks collaged over the landscape, her pristine immovability out of place against the rugged, dilapidated backdrop of his porch. Will almost thinks he's dreaming.

The scene is made stranger still by the envelope she presses into his hand, the front of it ridged with his name in Hannibal's perfect script.

She watches him steadily.

"He told me that you would find your way back to him. That you would find a way to forgive. When that time came, I was supposed to give this to you."

He looks at the letter in his hand, wondering at its thinness. He looks up at Bedelia. She looks dressed for travelling.

"I hope that this brings you back to him."

There's something more layered in her eyes, a hope-laced fear as she stares at the letter crumpled in his fist.

"You mean you hope that this puts Hannibal in your debt enough to keep you alive."

With that, he closes the door on her, needing to be alone with Hannibal's words.

He tears open the envelope and draws the paper out with shaking hands.

My Dearest Will,

Here is where I tell you that I am not living. Caged as I am, trapped as I am, without you as I am, I am not living. I am empty, unfulfilled. The desire to be whole endures.

The only comfort that feeds me is that fact of you, still in the world. How you fill me. How you sustain me. How you starve me with your absence.

I have hope enough to believe that this knowledge of my suffering brings you no joy.

Selfishly, I dream that you are similarly half-formed without me. Similarly wandering. Similarly unhappy. I hope you are sleepless, wakened in the night by an all-consuming ache. I hope that ache takes my shape. I hope that it would kill you to cut a new form.

Is it unkind that I wish you pain? Fine. I wish you pain.

The most staggering art comes from places of pain.

Kandinsky believed that the purpose of art was not to depict the so-called 'real world.' Rather, he believed that it should create a new world which has nothing to do with the external reality. True art is what is internal, what is greater. It is subject only to cosmic laws.

We are art, Will. Beautiful, impossible art.

That which resides between us is frightening, Will. I will not deny you that. The most fantastic doubts have taken root inside of me, all of them to do with you. You have transformed me in the most extraordinary way. You have made me more than I could have ever imagined myself to be. But that greater self does not exist without you.

I am asking you to give me your whole self so that we may create our whole self.

It does strike me, as I write this, that there is so very much that I have taken from you. To ask you to give me anything seems cruel and excessive, I am aware, but I am an all-consuming creature. This you already knew.

If I had my way, I would line my skin with yours; would ingest your head and your heart, if only to possess your soul. I want to own every part of you and never let you go.

But possession—like forgiveness, like love—requires two people. You hold me with more than what mortal hands can touch. I have made my decision. The rest is up to you.

Here is where I reduce myself to begging, stripped of pride and dignity. I am on my knees. You have everything of me.

If you will not have me, I will not have anything. This is the true religion. This is the new faith. You will either kill me or bring me back to life.

Yours, Irrevocably So,
Hannbial

Oh the bitten mouth...oh the hungering teeth...

“This is not what I was envisioning,” Hannibal remarks morosely.

Will glances over at him, easily summoning the annoyance.

“What, *exactly*, is not fulfilling your aesthetic expectations? Because, I hate to break it to you, but this is more or less the fugitive state.”

He gestures to the car at large, old and stolen, reeking of gasoline. The drag of his hand spans across the two of them, soot-covered and hastily dressed in mismatched clothes after fleeing from a fire that Hannibal himself had set.

He waits for Hannibal to snort in displeasure or resume his constant barrage of complaints—the same ones he’s been parading across Will’s attention for the last five hours—but he’s silent in the driver’s seat.

Ensconced in petulance, Hannibal ignores him in favor of glaring at the McDonald’s bag on the dashboard. Cast blue in the glow of the radio, he somehow still manages to look otherworldly, even beneath the lone, flickering streetlight they’re currently parked beneath.

“I don’t understand why anyone would ever want to *deep fry* their potatoes.”

Will lets out a pinched sigh. He can’t decide which he’d rather do: strangle or punch Hannibal.

“Well, I don’t know,” he says, fury leaking out. “You were pretty willing to do the same thing to us not too long ago.”

Hannibal fixes him with a look that very clearly says that he thinks that Will is being unreasonably difficult about this whole situation, and Will decides that he’d very much like to shove Hannibal out of the moving car when it’s his turn to drive.

“That was necessary, Will. Our DNA was all over that house, and we killed two people in our basement.”

“That was *messy*, Hannibal.”

Hannibal stares at him with fathomless eyes, unreadable in the dark. Something pained pulls through the silence, and Hannibal turns away from him to look out the window, watching the horizon line.

Sunrise is far enough away that Will can’t quite yet feel the night pulling toward it, can’t quite yet see the grays and blues that will eventually give way to light. They’re at the point where everything feels raw and slightly surreal.

“Hannibal,” he breathes, his surety vanishing along with the anger in his tone. “Why couldn’t you just burn it in your mind palace? Why did you have to take a literal flame to it?”

Hannibal’s words come back to him, feeling lifetimes away: *Here is where you feared me. Here is where you regretted me.*

Hannibal twitches toward him, the shadows stretching long under his eyes. He reaches out a hand that Will graciously pretends isn’t shaking. It folds softly around his cheek, uncertain fingers tracing the curve of bone.

“Everything is different with you, Will. You are only real to me insofar as I can touch you.” He leans forward and drags his nose up the column of Will’s neck, breathing him in. “No memory can successfully render you. No illusion of you can wholly satisfy me. No dream is oxygen enough to keep me breathing. I need you here.”

He tips their mouths together, but it’s not a kiss. Hannibal just breathes, sucking down Will’s air so relentlessly fast that it makes him dizzy.

Like everything with Hannibal, tinges of tender violence cloak the action, and it makes Will unaccountably hard. He aches to touch Hannibal, but, in this moment, he knows he’s not allowed. His fingers grip the cracked leather seat instead, his hands cramping with the tightness of his hold.

“Everything you touch becomes filled by you,” he gasps against his lips. “Every place you leave…every person…”

Hannibal’s fingers cage around his throat. Squeeze so tightly that Will can feel the thud of blood behind his eyes.

“It all *aches* with your presence.” He breathes greedily in the face of Will’s suffocation. “But in your absence, it’s…” Will’s vision begins to blur, but he doesn’t fight the crushing grip. “…*agony*.”

Without warning, Hannibal releases him, leaving him slumped and panting. And then he’s there, looming above him, drinking in every choked exhale.

It takes Will delayed minutes to register the pain of Hannibal’s nails sunk into his cheeks.

“I am sorry, Will.”

Agony rides roughshod over his voice, turning his words hoarse.

“I am sorry. But I need you to understand. Everything with you is so painfully *real* to me. And that place…what you did to me there—”

“—I’m sorry for that.” Will’s heart is in his throat, his ears roaring loudly with blood rush.

They haven’t talked about this. Not even after it happened did they mention it. Up until this very moment, Will hadn’t even been sure that Hannibal had known. For the first time in a long time, Will is truly afraid.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers.

“I know you are, Will. I know. We are starting over. We are reborn.” He sighs and leans back, his entire face becoming a shadow. “Covered in ashes, but reborn.”

There is something deadened and withdrawn in his voice, and he pulls completely away from Will; won’t look at him. Will wants to scream in panic and frustration; wants to scramble toward him; wants to say he’ll sew his knees to Hannibal’s feet, will spend every day atoning, begging to be let back in.

Almost unthinkingly, Hannibal traces a finger down his cheek, through the drying blood.

“Absence that ablates,” he murmurs thoughtfully, almost to himself. He draws his finger through his lips. “I wonder what of me you’ll take next.”

I unhook my ribs, spread my lungs flat on a chair.

Will pitches his full weight against the glass, the letter splayed flat between Hannibal and his hand. The quiet that stretches between them is the kind that invites foolish hope.

Do you mean it?

He wants to ask it, but he doesn't trust his voice not to shake and rob him of the only power he has left.

Hannibal blinks at him leisurely, the smallest twitch of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

Will's control wavers worryingly; his composure begins to rupture.

Do you? he wants to scream. *Because if you do, then everything is forfeit, everything is surrendered to you.* Confessions tumble freefall through his brain: *My body belongs to your body. I don't even think my body existed before you. I don't think I ever knew properly how to ache. I want you to climb the ladder of my ribs. Find every missing rung. You are the flay in my throat on the nights that I can't outscream the pain. You are the anchor at the base of my spine that doesn't let me jump. You are my heart, butterflied in my chest. All my life, I've wanted a home, and I think I've finally found it. I think it's in your blood.*

"I want to touch you," is what he says, instead.

Hannibal smiles at him. It's a thing warped by sadness and regret.

"You want such impossible things from me."

"I just want to touch you," he repeats, meaning, *'I want to rip apart your bones and rebuild them around me.'* Meaning, *'I want to hold your heart in my hands, just so I can swallow it whole.'*

"Hannibal," he breathes. "How did we end up here?"

Hannibal makes a soft noise. Like an animal caught in a trap.

"Tell me what you know about breaking, and I'll tell you how we ended up here."

"*Breaking*."

Will repeats it blankly, as though he doesn't know the concept intimately.

Finally, Hannibal steps closer to him, looks at him with so much luxuriant sadness that Will feels it pool in his own chest, feels the paralytic desperation that grows from it, wrapping in vines around his spine.

"Breaking, Will.

“Say you’ve broken a cup. Your favorite cup. It’s smashed on the floor and lost to you. Shattered beyond repair.”

Will closes his eyes and doesn’t want to listen. They’ve had this discussion before. He already knows that the pieces don’t go back together.

He’s always wanted such impossible things.

“Now, you know that the cup is broken. You know that you can’t fix it. But you can’t bring yourself to clean it up because once you do, once you hold the pieces in your hands, you’ll know that it’s real.”

Hannibal’s smiling at him again, as though reassuring him that the pain of this won’t stop.

“So, you leave it on the floor, let it gather dust. When people come to visit you, you don’t tell them to watch their step. You don’t rope it off, like a crime scene on your floor. Either way, they’re going to cut their foot or grind it to dust beneath their heel. That cup was going to keep putting shards in your life, anyway. It’s why you left it there.”

His eyes go liquid with refractive sorrow.

“You want to always remember what you broke.”

Will sighs and breathes out the last vestiges of his doubt. Hope clings, viscous and relentless in his windpipe.

“That cup still exists. Even though you dropped it. Even though you broke it. It still exists.”

Hannibal begins pacing. Like an animal tracking its prey, considering the kill.

Will hurries on, desperate to clarify, needing Hannibal to hear it.

“It’s in a different shape now; it exists in a different state, but it’s still there.”

“*Will,”* Hannibal breathes.

And Will hasn’t heard his name sound like that in a long time. It sounds like air.

“We aren’t broken, Hannibal. We don’t need to be *saved.* We don’t need to be *fixed.* We just need to exist in a different state.”

Hannibal looks at him in shining triumph, the victory hard-won and snaked between his teeth.

“Will,” he repeats. “Run away with me.”

I think that this is love but it feels just like helplessness.

“We have to stop doing this to each other.”

Hannibal doesn’t open his eyes, but Will knows that he’s listening. He can feel his body pull tight with sinewy tension.

“We have to stop doing this to each other,” he whispers.

The thud of his heart fills the troughs between Hannibal’s breaths.

And, suddenly, the symphony of their bodies makes no sense to him. Dizzyingly, he can’t reconcile the mapping of skin beneath him with all of the promises that it was supposed to keep. They weren’t supposed to be like this. It wasn’t supposed to fall apart like this.

The panic hits him like a bullet, just below the breastbone.

He and Hannibal weren’t supposed to unravel. They weren’t supposed to be tearing into each other with seam rippers: no trust, no wholeness.

“We have to stop doing this to each other.”

He buries his nose in the hollow of Hannibal’s neck, sweat-soaked and smelling surprisingly human.

“We *have* to stop doing this to each other.”

The heaviness of his body on top of Hannibal’s finally registers, like Hannibal is the central point of gravity in their black hole existence.

“We have to *stop* doing this to each other.”

There’s no accounting for the dread that’s suddenly hitting his bloodstream, coating his veins in malignant terror.

“We have to stop doing this to each other.”

Will hears his voice break.

“We have to stop doing this to each other. We have to stop doing this to each other. We have to *stop*. *We have to stop.* We have—”

Hannibal cuts him off with a hard kiss, flipping him over and pressing him to the bed. The old, motel mattress groans in protest, a loose spring digging into his back.

There is no comfort in it; there’s not meant to be. There’s just the solid, unrelenting fact of Hannibal’s lips against his.

“I know, Will,” Hannibal whispers against his fevered skin. “I know. We have to stop doing this to each other,” he repeats back, over and over again. It’s a vicious, thrumming rhythm, ripping him to shreds.

After a while, Will swears that it becomes, *you have to stop doing this to me.*

Interlude — Dream.

Pointed tree peaks form a jagged horizon. Bony fingers of their skeletal branches drag across the night sky, impaling the pale, circular light of the moon. His breathing expels in hot, panicked puffs. Small hairs on the back of his neck prickle, sensing the impending kill. Shaking fingers dance over the trigger.

As he steps forward, a twig snaps, sparks popping under his shoe. He waits tense minutes, inexplicably afraid that the dry brush around him is going to catch fire. The silence is arid around him.

Another branch snaps, this time in the far off distance. A shadow darts between the trees. He can feel the thud of the beast's heartbeat almost as though it resides in his own ribcage. It's a pulsing in his head, in his hands: kill-kill-kill-kill-kill.

The shot is fired before he even realizes he's made the conscious decision to do so. The bullet glows orange, cutting a fiery stripe through the black midnight.

The stag falls hard. The ground quakes beneath his feet, knocking his knees together.

He can't explain just why it hurts the way it does: watching the life leave its massive body. He doesn't understand the ache he feels in his ribs, as though he is the one through whom the bullet is lodged.

Almost in slow motion, he weaves through the trees, barely able to tear his eyes away from declining rise and fall of the stag's chest. When he finally flanks him, he drops to his knees at its side, a knife now in his hand. He knows he's going to do it before he does. But that doesn't make it hurt any less.

In a flash of metal, he brings the point of the blade to the gut of the beast. He carves it open, organs and bones spilling out. Blood gushes out between his fingers, and he futilely tries to shove it back in. It washes over him in a crimson cascade, unstoppable and much too thick. It's overtaking his head, now, and he's not even fighting to tread water.

The last thing he remembers as he goes under is the steady beat of two hearts in time and a single thought: if this is drowning, then when was the last time I breathed?

Which of us will survive / which of us will survive the other?

“Will!”

He closes his eyes, breathes in the dust, and doesn’t answer.

It wasn’t supposed to be her.

Bags wait at his feet, one from his house and the other from Hannibal’s, packed only minutes ago by his shaking hands, their zippers bubbled crookedly over too many clothes.

“Will?”

Her voice wavers uncertainly in the stagnant air. The walls themselves hold their breath. Her footsteps roll tentatively over the hardwood floors, the cautious tread of someone walking through a graveyard.

She finds him in Hannibal’s dining room, standing alone in the dark.

He’d set the scene for someone else, wanting the first time they saw each other to be nostalgic and bitter and hopeful all at once.

“Will.” She breathes out in palpable relief at seeing him. “We have to go.”

Moonlight spills in through the open window behind him, bathing Alana in pale, silver light. She looks washed out and gaunt and terror-gripped.

All he can think is, *It wasn’t supposed to be you.*

Something has changed. Hannibal has decided to go off-plan.

She’s reaching out a desperate hand. Beckoning him.

But Will needs to know. *Is he free? Is he still coming for me? Does he still want me?*

Hannibal had made them wait a month for this, but now that it’s finally real, it doesn’t feel real at all. It feels too raw, too all-of-a-sudden. The air pulses with low-level urgency—a delayed, distant bruising of time counting down.

Will sinks further against the heavy wooden table, his fingers curling against it one by one.

“Now, Will!” she hisses. “We have to go *now*.”

“Where is he.”

The question is deadly soft and unerringly still and decidedly not a question at all. It’s made of careful bones, just like Will himself, because he is starting to suspect that the ground beneath him does not exist.

Alana blinks at him in unreserved shock, apparently baffled that he can't seem to sense the urgency of the situation. But Will's heart is making a bid for escape, and he's actually afraid that it's going to break through his chest cavity to do it, and he's still not sure if the floor is there, and he's trying so very hard to make himself believe. He feels as though this redefines urgency.

"Will, we don't have time for this," she begs, voice shredding from frustration. "They're going to figure out he's gone, soon. Please, we have to go—"

"—Alana! Where is he."

"He's fine. He told me to get you. Just come, please come with me—we have to hurry—you'll see. He's waiting for you. He said he'd be waiting for you."

I can't. I can't walk. I can't come with you. There's nothing here beneath my feet.

She's breathing, and he can hear it, and he thinks he's breathing, but he can't feel it, so he can't be sure. He thinks he'd feel better if he was dying instead of already dead, and he's unaccountably terrified that he isn't going to survive coming back to life.

Her silhouette becomes complicated. It ripples and duplicates in front of his eyes.

And wonder takes corporeal form as Hannibal melts out of the darkness to stand across from him. He's bloodstained and smiling softly, a tender confession of realized faith. It's barely believable to see him there, breathing as though it's commonplace, existing like it isn't a miracle.

Hannibal steps closer to him; not close enough to touch. But the floor is holding beneath his feet, and his chest is rising and falling with heavy, monstrous breaths that Will can feel and hear.

"Hello, Will."

Don’t touch me if you don’t mean it.

“I don’t know where we’re going,” Will remarks, suddenly, the thought just occurring to him.

He lets that settle in the air for a moment, deciding that he likes the shape of it. It has the quality of a catch-all.

Hannibal doesn’t answer him. Instead, he picks at a loose thread in their threadbare duvet, his eyes downcast. It’s a nervous habit that doesn’t wear well on him, and Will finds it jarring and disorienting and unfamiliar. He doesn’t remember ever living in that unsure body, doesn’t remember stretching his fingers through those fingers. For the first time since he met Hannibal, Will feels completely severed from him.

The heater beneath their motel window kicks to life, the sound of it rusty.

I want to touch you, he thinks, his heart in his throat. *No. I want* you *to touch* me. *I want you to throw me off the edge of the cliff, and I want you to follow me over, and I want you to be the cliff itself.*

“We have to stop doing this to each other,” he whispers, the previous night coming back to him. He feels all of their months of running pass him by. He takes all of their days and unfolds them, lays them out, side by side. Days to nights. Hannibal is the seam in them all.

The panic sets his bones awash in terror anew.

“We have to stop doing this to each other,” he says. Meaning, *There can’t be a ‘me’ and a ‘you’ anymore. There can only be an ‘us.’* Meaning, *Air.* Meaning, *Drowning.*

Finally, Hannibal looks up at him, exhaustion folding over his cheeks, like air weathering stone. He leans over his knees, those uncertain hills, and traps his hands beneath his thighs.

Will takes a crooked step forward, pulling off his shirt as he goes. His flesh pimples anticipatorily in the unexpectedly cold air.

“I’ve, ah, always liked your hands,” he yields, self-consciously. “They’ve always known exactly what to do.” *So lay them against me, and bring my bones crashing down.*

Will’s hands catch on the button of his jeans. He fumbles it open, drags the zipper down. His pants fall, the fabric folding heavily at his feet.

There; he can breathe again. There; he’s bare before him, just as he’s always been.

He walks into the valley of Hannibal’s legs. From the soles of his feet comes the rough certainty that there will be no more steps alone.

Hannibal looks up at him, his expression brittle, his eyes carefully blank.

“You don’t want me, William.”

He flinches, the words feeling like sacrilege, his blood curdling from them like the sea rushing away from its shores. His body rejects the lie: an organ that doesn’t match.

How can you say that? he wants to demand. *How can you fail to see? I want you down to the roots of my nerves—I’m nothing but fibers of desire for you.*

Will frames Hannibal’s face in his hands, suddenly awed by the fact of holding the entire world between his palms. He tells his fingers not to shake. If they do, he could rip out the axis, the spine of his world. He could change the polarity, make all of the blood run in the wrong direction.

When their lips meet, there is nothing. Will wants to cry for how far apart they feel.

Hannibal sighs into his mouth, the resignation gone bitter.

“It was only a grand deception, Will. Insidious persuasion. A manipulated illusion.”

Hannibal won’t touch him, and it hurts.

Will runs tender hands down Hannibal’s face, and it feels forbidden. But he doesn’t care. He’ll make this a robbery, if he has to.

The pads of his fingers slip between Hannibal’s lips, and Hannibal smiles at him, a broken thing, made of shards of glass. He mouths Will’s name like he’s telling him goodbye.

“You didn’t trick me into this, Hannibal.”

He eases his grip to Hannibal’s shoulders, forces him off of the bed and onto his knees.

“You didn’t pull this out of thin air.”

Hannibal presses his face against Will’s stomach and breathes him in, long and wavering. Will stays utterly still, until the fear bleeds away. He doesn’t comment on the wetness beading on his skin.

“This has nothing to do with conflation. It isn’t a matter of separating myself from you. Even if I wanted to.” Will’s voice breaks. “As if I could unspool you from where you’re twined around my spinal column. As if ribs could ever forget the hollow scrape of hunger. As if teeth could ever forget the memory of taste.”

Hannibal collapses against his thighs, those hollow sheaths of skin. Presses his forehead against the tops of Will’s naked feet. There are no answers in flesh anymore. That’s why killing each other will do them no good. Hannibal could swallow him whole and only end up empty.

It’s no longer about digging out what lies within. It’s about trusting what’s between.

Hands locked around Will's ankles, Hannibal drags his head up the length of his leg, his tongue tracing a line from knee to hip. A full body shudder wracks through him as he catches Hannibal's head in the crook of his arm, cradling him close, as a mother would hold her growing child in the swell of her belly.

This love is a precious gift. An open wound, torn wider every day. A broken bone to be set and broken again.

Carefully, Hannibal kisses the ridge of his hip, the concave dip of his stomach. The gooseflesh scattered across his skin is a betrayed braille. An unspoken admission of the fear he feels, still, when they touch. Hannibal chases it away with the heat of expelled breath.

With an amputated breath, Hannibal looks up at him through eyes like black pits.

There's an open, tunneling emptiness in that gaze, and Will can see the hole on the other end. The one that he put there, right at the center of Hannibal's chest, just so he could fill it.

Will sees the plea on his face, the raw vulnerability of it corroding everything else.

"I know," he whispers raggedly. "I'm sorry. I'll never tell you 'no' again."

Hannibal makes a sound like a dying man and lays him on the bed, the motion wrapped in velvet tenderness. Will's skin is so raw, it stings, just the same.

Hannibal finds every scar mapping his body and cuts his teeth on each one.

And that's fine. That's just fine. Hannibal can own every ache on his body. Can claim the ravaged warpath of his flesh.

Hannibal clings with a primal fear, and Will finds he has a cruel appetite for that.

Come to me with all of your hunger. Come to me with every craving.

Give it to me raw. Give it to me bloody.

Call this madness. Call it drowning, bodies, scars, air. Call this love.

"Listen," he chokes out when their bodies finally slide together. "Listen."

We no longer have two heartbeats. We only have the one.

It is raining inside my dream of you.

“Freedom doesn’t wear foreign on you.”

Will is well aware of the accusation in his voice, but he doesn’t trouble himself with it. At this point, he could make a meal of blame.

Hannibal smiles at him over the darkened counter, his hands splayed flat on the marbled surface. He looks unworried and at ease. Far too comfortable in his borrowed human skin.

“Who says that I’m free?”

The look that Hannibal gives him is weighty with heavy implications and easily dismembered intent, and it makes the air thicker and harder to breathe.

“Don’t do that. Don’t skew this into existentialism.” *Don’t try to step into my mind and change the way I see.*

Ubiquitous confidence and self-possession in place, Hannibal watches him through hooded eyes, careful to trace the edges of every expression that flits across his face.

Hands shaking, Will takes a full step back.

They face each other down in a stranger’s kitchen, nothing but dusty air between them.

It feels appropriate that they are here, where Hannibal can pull him apart, bleed him dry, arrange him neatly on a platter.

“For three years, you were caged.”

Will largely keeps the tremors from his voice because this is vital; this needs to be said. He needs to know the physical dimensions of their bodies and the space between them—he needs to know how and where they exist and why.

“You were *caged*,” he repeats, “and now you’re free.”

“It’s been longer than three years, Will.”

His heart slams to a stop in his chest.

“What?”

“I’ve been caged for longer than three years.”

“Stop it. Don’t—don’t.”

They hang off the edge of that for a moment, afraid to unpack it. Afraid to touch its combustible contents.

Will can't breathe properly. This is terrifying and unwelcome and necessary. He would sooner be able to unlearn breathing than to break whatever it is that's keeping them tethered together.

Hannibal's hands are still flat on the counter. Will can see the blood pooling around them.

Against his will, his mind flashes to a different kitchen, hours ago, hundreds of miles away, and Alana bleeding out on the floor. He thinks of the eight people Hannibal left dead at the hospital, sees their mouths gaping open, holding in the ghosts of their final screams.

If he closes his eyes, he could live every one of those kills. His fingers itch with the blood caked beneath his nails.

Hannibal eases closer to him.

"You didn't have to kill them," he bites out between clenched teeth. "We had a plan. You didn't have to kill them."

"But I did, Will. No one would have believed that I just walked free of my cell without a struggle, without bloodshed. Not without suspecting Alana's involvement. I had to make her my hostage. My unwilling witness."

"What does *that* matter? You killed her, anyway."

"I didn't kill her." Hannibal is inches away from him now, pinning him down with his black liquid eyes. "I gave her a fighting chance. The same one I gave you."

He lifts the edge of Will's shirt, revealing the clean, stark line of white, puckered skin at his stomach. He traces it as though memorizing its shape, so he can know how it would taste to press his mouth flush against it.

Hannibal drags his nose across Will's collarbone, settles it in the dip at the hollow of his neck. He breathes him in.

Will's muscles seize with terrible desire to hold, to rip, to claim. Cautiously, he reaches for Hannibal's hand, still pressed flat against his stomach.

He imagines plunging his hands through his own skin, getting elbow-deep inside of himself; the wash of warm blood, spilling out.

Is this what we're going to be? A murder scene?

Hannibal laces their fingers together and holds on so tightly that their fingers develop their own heartbeat.

It's delicate. Hannibal opens for him, one petal at a time, like the folds of a human heart.

His lips skate across his skin as he scents Will, across his neck, down his arm.

"I thought there would be new parts to you, Will. Things you grew without me."

Hannibal catches the thin skin of his wrist between his teeth and smells.

“There isn’t—there aren’t,” Will gasps. “There’s only negative space.”

He can feel the inward bleed of Hannibal, can feel him seeping back into the fault lines of his bones, becoming a part of him again.

And he doesn’t want it. He can’t bear it.

No, he thinks. *I don’t want this.*

Hannibal stops in his ministrations, draws slightly away. He still has his hold on Will’s hand, but the touch hurts, now. It twists too tightly, pulls the skin the wrong way.

He looks into the monster’s eyes. Thinks, *I don’t want this.* He feels the beast blood threaten to boil over.

I DON’T WANT YOU.

Hannibal looks the way that a ragged, gaping wound feels.

He pulls away from Will, his face closed and unreachable, and becomes swallowed by shadows.

Tempo Rubato.

“When I was young,” Will whispers, “I was terrified of the inside of my body.”

Hannibal curls further around him, his hands suffocatingly soft. The silence sharpens, and Will can *feel* him holding his breath, listening.

“Other people’s rage, their agony and their fear and their pain, it all became mine. It all *ripped* through me, and I couldn’t control it. I couldn’t understand it or separate it. I didn’t know the boundaries of who I was. I couldn’t feel the borders between myself and other people.”

The wedge of Hannibal’s knee nudges between his thighs, subtle as a scalpel. Their hands tangle together at Will’s stomach in a confusing copse of fingers.

“I imagine that would have been very difficult for you. And very, paradoxically, isolating.”

The words roll tentatively, almost as though Hannibal’s not sure if he’s allowed to have this; if he’s allowed to know.

Will tucks further against him and thinks about blurring lines and shifting alliances. He closes his eyes and finds that it makes no difference in the dark.

“I began to resent everyone around me—my peers, my parents, all of the doctors that they would bring me to. It was too much noise; too much color…just this, tidal wave of synesthesia. I was choking on all of these other people.”

“And in the midst of this all, you had no idea who you were.”

Will hums in agreement.

Cottony breath wafts over his cheek. His skin almost seems to dissolve beneath it.

Hannibal grows around him, the curve of his spine doming over the smaller hunch of Will’s body.

“As humans, one of the first things we learn is self-conceptualization. Very quickly, children learn to say, ‘This is Me. That is You.’ They understand that they have thoughts and feelings independent of those around them. They know, without having to be taught, that their personhood is a unique, autonomous incidence.”

Hannibal noses at his neck, the action affectionate and blunted. He speaks his next words into skin.

“You, Will, never had that. From a very young age, you had to tell yourself: *this pain doesn’t belong to me; these hands don’t want to hurt; this sorrow inhabits a different body.* You had to define yourself through negation. Never once did you definitively say, *This is Me.*”

"*You* never had that problem," Will says, not able to stop the bitter curl of his words.

"No," Hannibal agrees. "I have always known who I am, and I think that it would be a disservice to my nature to deny it. You, however, have never lived easily inside of your body."

"No, well, that was the trick. I was hyperaware of my body, of the physical limits to it. Its untouchability, its invulnerability. I told myself that I would be safe as long as everybody stayed inside of their bodies. They weren't allowed inside of mine. I forced them all behind walls of flesh. It was the only sanity I could find.

"But I had to be on constant guard. At any moment, I could go salt, and all of that control would just melt away."

"You tried to externalize the innermost part of yourself. That breathtaking mind of yours, and you held it hostage. There were fleeting moments of eclipsed viewpoints, moments where you stared unflinchingly at the grotesque; moments where you embodied the violence."

Hannibal sweeps a hand down Will's side, summoning goosebumps. Lazily, he trails his finger across Will's skin, tracing the needlepoint of longing and need.

"But you always made yourself look away."

"Until I met you," Will mumbles, his face pressed against the pillow. "And I realized that I didn't want to look away anymore. And I didn't want to forget."

"We walked the hallways of those memories together. We built new rooms. And then you shuttered the windows. Locked the doors. Left me to gather dust."

Will twists in his arms, spiraling the sheets around their hips.

"I let you into my mind—let my consciousness bleed into yours. And, suddenly, I couldn't feel our edges anymore. Everything that you had ever done, everything that you had ever touched, all belonged to me. And I wanted it. And I didn't."

He presses his cheek against the sandpaper flesh of Hannibal's throat, feels the quiver of his chin in his hair.

"The first time I met you, Will, I was intrigued. You, alone, could see me. You, alone, could know me. And I wanted it. And I didn't. I was so hungry for it, Will, that it completely numbed me to the terror."

"You've never been afraid of anything in your life."

Will feels Hannibal smile.

"I realized fear of you the same way that doctors find the cancer right before it kills you. It wasn't until I saw my skin undone from bone that I discovered just how far you'd unraveled me.

“I routinely underestimate you, Will. I have unprecedented stupidity when it comes to you. I thought I could live without you. I thought it didn’t matter where you went because I would always have you in my head. I soon realized that that was like chopping off a man’s legs and telling him to walk.

“There is but one self between us, Will. One body.”

Obeying the familiar seize of hunger at his ribs, Will tilts his chin, feels the brutally fragile air leaving Hannibal’s lips. He touches his cheeks with the tentative tips of his fingers.

“This is me,” he breathes.

I love you and my love for you makes any other life a lie.

Chapter Summary

PART TWO.

"...We keep
telling the other, I love you
and I love you, *and we do,*
though we both know
where the knives are."

—Laura Van Prooyen, "This Child"

"I'm trying to think of the right way to say this."

"All right."

"I know there's a way to say this. I just can't find words big enough to hold it."

"Perhaps you could give me an idea of its boundaries."

"I love you to the edges of my soul and back."

"I see."

"Are you laughing at me?"

"I am. But don't be alarmed; I don't find it particularly amusing."

"Then why—"

"Because, my darling Will, you do not mean it. It's not your fault. I'm sure you think you do. But you haven't yet made the return journey."

End Notes

Chapter Title Sources

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